

S26: Prague

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On the 26th of September, 10,000 people gathered in Prague to protest the activities of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The protesters faced massive police repression that led to rioting in the city. The meetings were canceled one-and-a-half days early.

I heard about what was going on in Prague, but it wasn't until I met this guy, Joe, in Budapest that I made plans to go. Joe is an Italian from Washington State who can karaoke the words to every Neil Diamond song ever written. He had the phone number for the volunteer coordinator there and promised free food and housing. We got drunk one night and Joe explained the issues well. The IMF, World Bank, Injustice, Capitalism. I had followed the movement in the States even pre-Seattle, but Prague seemed more real. I had a phone number and someone expecting me. So in the beginning of September I headed that way.

The plan was to spend some time sightseeing and helping out for a couple of hours on the side. I called the number that Joe had given me and met up with Pi, a stripper who had spent a year of her life in a tree. She directed me to the media team. I walked into the office to volunteer and walked out sixteen hours later as "office manager" of the media center. I still had no housing and no free food. They were short on resources. Joe was wrong.

The work was empowering. I gave interviews and worked on press statements for two weeks. A conversions center was up and running to provide a meeting space for working groups. The center served food and kept us together. We weren't organized, but we had common ground. An info-center was finding housing and support for foreign activists. It was the efforts of Czech activists and international volunteers. More than 15 countries

participated. Cycle caravans arrived. Computers were sent along with broken fax machines. Flats were rented all over the city. Propaganda written in Czech was being distributed on street corners. Things were happening everywhere.

September 26 was the protest date. It was the start of the general session World Bank meetings. Representatives from all over the globe attended. An overwhelming number of rich, white, men.

A week before the protest date the Czech government closed the borders. They stopped letting activists into the country and were using all sorts of fucked-up laws to do it. A car full of guys from Germany was refused entry because their car first aid kit wasn't up to standard. Three members of the cycle caravan were denied entry for faulty bike headlights.

Things weren't any better in Prague. Activists were getting passport controlled and fined for everything. No smoking in metro stations. No jaywalking. No feeding the birds. The Czech police followed me when I went out for lunch. I figured they were just scare tactics, but they worked.

September 26th came quickly. We all met at 9:00 a.m. in Náměstí Míru (Czech for Peace Square). We had a permit to be there, but not to march. Once we left the square in protest we were committing a crime. Around 10,000 activists gathered in the square. The circus was great. There was techno music over the sound system. People dressed as trees and skeletons. Clowns handed out protest balloons to children. The Brits even brought a three-meter balloon that said "Balls to the IMF" Everyone had a banner.

After a little organized chaos, we all set off at 11:00 a.m. If you wanted to legally protest you could stay in the square, but I don't think anyone did. We divided into three-color



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groups: yellow, pink and blue. Organized by a volunteer committee, our routes were designed to shut down the meetings by dispersing police lines. Divide and conquer. Each group had a different route to take. The plan was to surround the conference center. We wanted to hold the delegates in there until they disbanded the whole institution.

I put on a powder blue shirt and marched. I marched with the blue group because the Infernal Noise Brigade was there. They're just a hard-core drum corps from Seattle with a great beat. So the blue group marched along to the rhythms of its own band and to chants of "No Justice! No Peace! Fuck the Police!"

I caught glimpses of the conference center just before we rounded the final corner. I guess there were more than 400 police at the blockade they set up for us. They were in full riot gear. Behind them was a water cannon and an armored police tank.

I honestly can't tell you who struck first. We tried to charge the left flank, I think, but they turned on the water cannon and that pushed us back. We should have sat it out because the plan was just to block the road. People wanted to get closer to the conference center. There was no back-up plan for this situation. I just moved with the crowd. We didn't stop though. We charged again, this time armed with cobblestones and sticks. I even watched one guy light a Molotov cocktail. I scattered to the right up a hill on a wooded embankment. The police launched a concussion grenade into the crowd. If you've never heard one they're the things movie people use to simulate machine gun fire. The police use them to panic a crowd. They work really damn well.

From the safety of the hill I watched the ant farm phenomenon of everyone scattering around. I was with Todd. We had met in the media center a few days earlier. He goes to school in New England and was prepared for the action. He wore all black and watched

my back well so we buddied up. Todd wanted to take some pictures so I walked down with him. When we got down the street was insane. The water cannon got going and hit me on the shoulder. It wasn't too strong, I guess, because it didn't knock me over.

I was getting used to the sound of the concussion grenades. They're not too bad if you write them off as noise. They hurt like hell when they hit you on the leg though. A bit of metal grabbed me on the left calf muscle. It burned, but it didn't draw blood.

When the tear gas started coming into the crowds Todd and I headed back up the hill. We had goggles and vinegar soaked rags, but it doesn't do that much. The vinegar is supposed to cancel out the effects of the gas, but you're still inhaling vinegar. It takes your breath away and makes you choke.


Then the police launched tear gas up on the hill, a really shitty thing to do because the people up there were staying out of everything. They didn't have goggles or anything. They just got straight gas. A guy next to me was coughing up blood and a girl vomited. I decided I'd had enough so I joined the retreat.

About 300 or so stayed on the street to fight it out, but the rest of us backed up a few hundred meters to get away from the gas. We were trying to figure out whether to stay or go. We even had a Czech man try to give us directions. I helped Todd bandage a guy's leg. It makes it a lot more real when you have someone's blood on your hands. I was holding the bandage while Todd cleaned. He had medical training.

We were trying to have a meeting to figure out what to do when the last 300 protesters came charging around the corner. The police had rioted, I suppose, by breaking formation and charging the activists. Todd and I started running, but we lost each other. We were trying to stay back and tell everyone to slow down, afraid that in the panic people were



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going to hurt each other. Later I found out that Todd had gotten hit by a billy club and needed six stitches in his scalp.

I was running hard. It was a strange moment because I never stopped to think what I was running from. The police closed us in quickly forcing us off the road into a grassy, wooded area. We were all sprinting and dodging trees. At the train tracks I had to climb under a petrol train. Some people went over, but I dropped to the ground and slid under on my stomach. Under the train was worse than running. Everybody was so scared they were just clawing to keep moving like frightened rabbits or something.

When I got on my feet there was a moving train coming from the other direction. It was far enough away that it saw us and slowed down, but it was still a moving train. Looking down the tracks, there were activists scattering everywhere. We all just kept running.

On the other side of the tracks there was a barbed wire fence. If I thought about it I probably would have done something cool like they do in the movies, but I didn't think, I just climbed. Some Polish anarchists were pushing the fence down, but I climbed. They had it flattened by the time I got to the ravine on the other side. It was a small drainage ditch with water so I got wet climbing through.

The next scene could have been any street in Prague on a Tuesday afternoon. It was cold, but the sun was shining. There was a park with a tram going through and an old couple with shopping bags. Then more than a thousand activists emptied out onto the street. They came out of the woods wet and muddy with cuts on their faces and arms. Some were pulling others who had been injured or were too tired to run anymore. The tear gas was coming over the train. A concussion grenade exploded under the moving tram. In Czech I tried to explain to the old couple to run, "Tak Dem," but they just kept

walking. So I stood there with my pants ripped and grass-stained and little drops of blood on my sleeves from the barbed wire.

It feels different than it looks on T.V. On CNN protesters look energized and instigating. The networks don't portray the fear. After the adrenaline, I questioned the logic. I fought for something I believe in. And I got hurt. But I would do it again. I believe in what I act for.

The first attack was thrown long before September 26th. It was 50 years ago with the creation of an organization that took Our power away. The policies of the IMF and the World Bank limit the sovereignty of the people. The rule of unelected representatives independently determines the political and economic fate of a country. The policies cause poverty and death by propagating the Imperialist system. Their function is to impose on "lesser developed" countries the policies that the West sees fit. Grassroots social movements have been resisting this injustice from the beginning. Seattle, Washington D.C. and Prague are representative of the increased participation and education in the movement. On September 26th people took direct action to demand direct democracy. This is what democracy looks like.